

PETER BELSITO: AN ORAL HISTORY

Interviewed by Jane Collings

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BIOGRAPHY

PETER BELSITO

Executive Vice President, Film Finders, Inc.

PETER BELSITO grew up in New York City and graduated from the University of Wisconsin, Madison and from the Masters film program at UCLA where he was a graduate teaching assistant at UCLA Film School. He was a founding member of Newsreel, a radical anti war student filmmaking collective. He was a founding member of the Independent Feature Project (IFP) in New York City in 1981 and opened the IFP office in Los Angeles. He was a founding member of the Chicano Cinema Coalition. After graduating from UCLA he worked professionally as a cinematographer, produced feature films and feature documentaries and wrote screenplays. His produced documentary 'Valley of Tears' is playing the festival circuit now (LA Latino FF, Margaret Mead FF 2003) and is being distributed US by Seven Arts. He worked in publishing for ten years for Charles T. Munger, Vice Chairman of Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway, and assisted Sydney Levine in founding FILM FINDERS in 1988 as a blue chip film acquisitions tracking, consulting and publishing firm. He came on board full time in 1995 as a FILM FINDERS partner, Head of Sales and Marketing as Executive Vice President. Fourteen years after Ms. Levine's successful launch of Film Finders, Peter recently founded the growing Film Finders Consulting division. Both Peter and Sydney have been involved for the last fifteen years in professional education and with young filmmakers via countless festival and market panels and forums and active course involvement with such institutions including Harvard, Wharton, the Maurits Binger Institute of Amsterdam, ACE of Paris, Rotterdam Cinemart, IFP New York, IFP West of Los Angeles etc. Both have originated and coordinated panels and conferences for various institutions as well as Film Finders. He lives in West Hollywood, California and travels extensively throughout the year to film festivals and markets worldwide.

ABOUT FILM FINDERS

FILM FINDERS is a publishing and consulting company that tracks new feature films worldwide by subscription for film buyers and acquisitions executives, festivals and markets. Its 4,000 plus annual new film listings and many clients are international. Since its founding in 1988 it has become the standard acquisitions tracking tool worldwide and has a reputation throughout the film business for quality and comprehensiveness of information. The two founders, President Sydney Levine and Executive Vice President Peter Belsito, travel extensively on the international film festival and market circuit each year and maintain close personal contacts with the trade, filmmakers and press via their frequent participation on panels and forums.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER: Jane Collings, Senior Editor, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., Communications, Antioch College; M.A., Communications, University of Iowa; Ph.D. Critical Studies in Film and Television, UCLA..

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Belsito's office in West Hollywood.

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Persons present during interview: Collings and Belsito.

CONDUCT AND PROCESSING OF INTERVIEW:

This is one in a series of interviews the UCLA Oral History Program has conducted with members of the Los Angeles Newsreel Collective.

Collings prepared for the interviews by reading David E. James article "An Impossible Cinema? The Proletarian Avant-Garde in Los Angeles" published in *Film International*, vol. 2, 2003, through discussions with James, and through consultation with Professor Bill Nichols of San Francisco State University, an authority on the subject of the Newsreel collectives nationwide.

The interviewer compiled the table of contents and interview history and supplied the spellings of proper nouns and the complete names entered in brackets in the text. Belsito reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names, made a minor number of corrections and additions, and provided the resumé at the front of the transcript. Michelle Weis, editorial assistant, prepared the guide to proper names.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records

of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

January 11, 2005

COLLINGS: This is Jane Collings interviewing Peter Belsito in his office in West Hollywood for the UCLA Oral History Program on January 11th, 2005.

So, good afternoon, Peter. I did a mic check before I came over, but why don't we see if you're registering.

BELSITO: This is how I would talk.

COLLINGS: Okay, looks beautiful. I gave you a little bit of intro, but why don't we just plunge right in and talk about how you met your good friend Jonathan Aurthur and how the two of you became involved with the group that was called Los Angeles Newsreel.

BELSITO: We met at UCLA film school in I believe it was the latter part of 1967. I was a teaching assistant and I was assigned to him. He was working on a student film and I was assigned to whatever it is we were supposed to do, go and help him, give him advice, whatever. That's how I first met him.

COLLINGS: Were you and he sort of friends immediately?

BELSITO: We became friends. We had common interests. We were both from New York. We had a lot of, I would say, mutual points of contact. We both read a lot. We were both into literature. We were both interested in politics, political affairs, and we liked the same kind of films.

COLLINGS: Now, just sort of as an aside, did you find that those interests were well met at UCLA film school at that time? I mean, was it a politicized atmosphere, in

your view?

BELSITO: Well, we had total contempt for UCLA film school. Our relationship with UCLA film school was you give us equipment and film stock and leave us alone, and we'll go out and make movies. Everybody basically felt like that, and as for the course work and the professors, I mean, we didn't hate them, but we didn't want to deal with them. Generally the student body got along pretty well, even though there were a number of filmmakers who were either careerists or they wanted a career in the film industry in Hollywood, and those of us who were more of the political or the guerilla filmmaking school or so forth, we didn't share those values.

COLLINGS: Did you know Chick Strand when you were there?

BELSITO: A familiar name. I don't recall.

COLLINGS: She was a sort of experimental filmmaker; had a career as a— But she was there at that time. So you went to a screening of *Off the Pig*, right?

BELSITO: That's an interesting story. I had gone to Europe the month before, with the idea that I was going to maybe become an expatriate, because I was about to leave school, and when you left school, the next thing that happened is you went to Vietnam and got killed because, as you might be aware, that was a much bigger and more deadly war, as far as these young people are concerned, than the current one. I mean, not that it was a better war; it was just a hell of a lot bigger. So I had considered becoming an expatriate, and then I went to Europe in September of '68 and then had realized that they were just as hopelessly screwed up as we were, and I decided I might as well live in this country because this is what I knew.

I came back and then, of course, my wife [Judy Belsito] had gotten pregnant,

and that meant I was now no longer going to be drafted; thanks to my daughter Lola [Belsito]. I had been looking in an alternative newspaper called the *Los Angeles Free Press*, and they had noted they had a screening sponsored by some group called San Francisco Newsreel of a Black Panther Party film called *Off the Pig*. And I said to Jonathan, I said, “We ought to go.” So Jonathan and I went over to see that; that was in a coffeehouse on Hoover in Echo Park.

COLLINGS: What do you remember about the film?

BELSITO: Well, we just loved it. It was a fifteen-minute film, and it showed footage of this Oakland-based black self-defense group who basically had a lot of guns and marched around in semimilitary uniforms and then tried to make alliances with sympathetic white radicals, which was us. So we liked them just fine; we thought they were okay. We met some other people that evening who were pretty important people in the anti-war and the left-wing student movement in Los Angeles at that time.

COLLINGS: Who were they?

BELSITO: Jim Fite and Mike Klonsky. They were very instrumental as one of the factions in a political happening called Days of Rage, which was during the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Then they’d come back, and then some of them—Not them; they weren’t part of the Weather Underground—but the Weather Underground then tried to carry forth things in Chicago I think in the fall of that year and really got beaten up bad by the cops. In any event, so they were those people, and they were not so much filmmakers as sort of more hard-core political-type people, political organizers and things. As our development down the road a year or two later, we came back and then got organizationally involved with a number of them,

particularly Jim Fite and his wife, Sherry Fite.

COLLINGS: At that meeting Paul Shinoff said that the San Francisco Newsreel would be willing to help people in Los Angeles start up a Los Angeles Newsreel, is that right?

BELSITO: Yeah, and Jonathan and I met with them. I don't recall the subsequent meetings, but maybe Jonathan went up to San Francisco; I'm not sure. I didn't, even though we did go up around that time to a Black Panther Party rally in Oakland, where Eldridge Cleaver spoke; I remember we drove up, Judy Belsito, Jonathan, and I.

I have to say, that was like the first and last time I saw Paul Shinoff, who I understand has since died, but he was a nice guy and he was a very impressive guy. It was really Paul who got us going, and then we decided to form Newsreel here. Part of it was driven by an interest in helping organizations such as the Black Panthers, because we felt that they were important, and that whole year, you understand, was the time of the riots [Watts Riots] in the cities here, which was a very, very big deal, if you recall. I don't know if you were—

COLLINGS: No, I wasn't. I was a bit young for that, but I certainly know about it.

BELSITO: It was big shit. Just the Black Movement was one of the linchpins that drove the politics of the anti-war movement, and the anti-war movement was really gaining steam at that time.

COLLINGS: You'd sort of think the anti-war movement, with the imperative to not want to be drafted, would be enough on its own. So why do you call the Black Movement sort of the linchpin?

BELSITO: Well, if you sort of look at it, let's look at the metaphor of that lousy

tsunami wave that killed everybody and washed over those countries. What the movements in the sixties were like and really what was sort of the character of the sixties was that these movements came like tidal waves, one after the other. I mean, it was the Civil Rights Movement, then the Anti-War Movement, then the Black Movement, then the Gay Movement, then the Women's Movement. These things came and they really just all washed over society, and they raised these questions that nobody had ever considered before and that suddenly became very important to all of our lives in various ways, and then generated movements and demonstrations and things off by themselves.

I mean, I went to the march in August of '63 in Washington [D.C.], where Martin Luther King [Jr.] gave the "I Have a Dream" speech, and that was a very interesting march, because what you had was the black people from the South who came to Washington, and you had all of these Jewish people and professional types and students from the Northeast and the Upper Midwest, all of whom came to— And it was a very impressive coming together that had never happened before, that had never really happened before. So the movements were kind of like that.

COLLINGS: Each giving sort of steam to the other.

BELSITO: Yeah, and tactics and ways of organizing and things like that, and then took other aspects, the anti-police and towards inner-city politics or urban politics in general. It was quite interesting, and it was crazy, too, because there was always something.

COLLINGS: It seemed like the L.A. Newsreel's mission had an agenda of radicalizing working-class people. Is that correct?

BELSITO: Well, see, what happened at the same time is we began to read the Marxist literature, and we became influenced like that. L.A. Newsreel had a very peculiar place among them, because there are Newsreels everywhere now, Seattle, Detroit, New York, everywhere. We were known as sort of the hard-core Marxist-Leninists, and what we were doing is, if you could see that Newsreel was basically formed by radical anti-war students, which was us, certainly, because we had the whole left wing of the film department was in it and came through and then left, but what happened, at the same time we began to study, and we began to move through that and began to see that organizing anything in the United States, our belief was that it should be done from the point of view of the working class. That's how we saw the Black Panther Party, and that's how we saw our job in L.A.

So we went and we showed films on campuses, to be sure, because we could charge them, but we also did work in communities, where we'd go to parks or we'd go to community centers and would also show films. I think the most important thing about Newsreel, really, when I think back, is we were the only source of films—the only source, because they weren't on TV, they weren't in the theaters, they weren't anywhere—films from Cuba, from Vietnam, from China, from Russia, from the Middle East, a lot of them about the war, but about various types of social causes. We were the only source, and that's what we did, and in some ways I think that was the most important thing that Newsreel did, because there was no Internet. I mean, there was no cable television. I mean, the television was Walter Cronkite and that's it.

COLLINGS: I've got a number of questions. How did you select the films, and then also I'll go on to ask you, I'm really curious to know how audiences responded to

these noncommercial types of films, because people really need to be tutored in these forms of film, as we well know.

BELSITO: It's a funny story, because one of the stories that nobody told—I think someone alluded to it at Jonathan's [memorial] service—was Jonathan's father set up a meeting with these Hollywood left-wing, elderly film people, all of whom were very rich or at least had good jobs. We were the impoverished students. I didn't go to this, but I had always heard about this thing. Jonathan went, and I think he invited some Black Panthers, and basically the meeting was, "We're going to kill you, whitey," which was the meeting. [mutual laughter] Jonathan's father was just, I remember, enraged, and nobody wrote a check.

COLLINGS: Was this when they showed the workprint for *Repression*?

BELSITO: I think so.

COLLINGS: And trying to raise some funding for pushing the film.

BELSITO: Yeah, yeah, and Dennis Hicks might have been there. But I'd always heard about that meeting, and it was like, oh, man.

COLLINGS: That's not going to work.

BELSITO: It was never my style, either. Politically, Jonathan was always a bit more to the left than me. I mean, I don't hold myself up as a paradigm or anything, but you probably could describe him as a little bit of ultra left. He sort of politically is where a friend of his, too, was, this guy Alexander Coburn, who has a website called *Counterpunch* that's pretty good. I go on it a lot. But Coburn is kind of an ultra leftist. Jonathan was like that, and I think he ran that meeting. Anyway, it was his father's contact.

COLLINGS: So let's just talk a little bit about you. Let's kind of go back and set things up chronologically. You go to the screening with Paul Shinoff. My understanding is something like two weeks later you met with a group of about eight people, Ron Abramson, Jonathan, Bill Kirby, Dennis Hicks, Steve Karatzas, Michael Murphy, Barbara Rose, and decided to form this group. What was your ambition at that time?

BELSITO: I think what we wanted to do, and I think it was a pretty noble ambition, I mean, one of the thing we really wanted to do was get our hands—I mean, first of all, we were basically all filmmakers, but one of the things we wanted to do, as we saw the role of Newsreel, was getting our hands on these films and getting them out for people to see, which wasn't easy, because the only means you had then was sixteen-millimeter prints. That was it. There was no tape; there was no nothing. I mean, it was really bad. But that was one of the goals.

The other goals was then picking stuff that we wanted to make, and we had started a film about the Black Panther Party here, and there are various types of projects which we knocked around. I would have to say out of all the Newsreels, we were probably the least productive in terms of making film.

COLLINGS: But you did a lot of exhibition.

BELSITO: That was a big deal. That was a very, very big deal, and I think all of the Newsreels did that, and that's one of the sort of the great untold stories. I know as far as the FBI was concerned, when they began to bother us, that's what they talked about.

COLLINGS: The exhibition.

BELSITO: Yeah, they said that we were distributing enemy propaganda; that's what they called it.

COLLINGS: About particularly the Vietnam—Made in Vietnam.

BELSITO: Well, you know, Cu Chi village. I mean, Cu Chi village was this village about ten miles outside of Saigon that they kept sending B-52s over to bomb, and they could never get rid of it because what it was, it was this huge tunnel network under the ground, and they never, ever got—The U.S. Army never really figured out—They'd go and they'd blow up tunnels, and it didn't do any good, because there were always more.

COLLINGS: Gee, that sounds so familiar.

BELSITO: Yeah, doesn't it. But Cu Chi was kind of an amazing place, and the film was a wonderful film.

COLLINGS: This was a Vietnamese film?

BELSITO: Yeah, it was about Cu Chi. It was called *Cu Chi Guerilla Village*.

COLLINGS: How did you get a hold of these films that were made in Vietnam at that time?

BELSITO: I don't know. I mean, San Francisco would get them for us. I had no idea how they got in the country. I remember I had a film, a Palestinian film that I had gotten. It was a bit later, but somebody had given it to me, and it was in French, and I translated it from the French.

COLLINGS: Simultaneous translation.

BELSITO: I think I actually wrote subtitles.

COLLINGS: I see.

BELSITO: It was from one of the Palestinian groups. I forget what it was about.

Well, it certainly wasn't pro-Israel, but that struggle then was at a kind of a different stage than it is now.

COLLINGS: So the thinking of the group at the time was that if people knew the truth, then things would change.

BELSITO: I would say that our thinking was exactly the same as the way that people who are against the war, the current war, think. I mean, the parallels between this war and Vietnam are just unreal, and even where yesterday or the day before where they announced they're going to start the assassination program again; they said, "Like what we did in El Salvador." That wasn't El Salvador. I have a friend who wrote a book about it. They had a program in Vietnam called the Phoenix Program, where they would go; they had thousands and thousands of teams of assassins would go and just kill people all over the country all the time, and it never did any good. It never did any good. It was exactly like in Iraq, where every time they'd get—There would be more and more people opposing them, just exactly like in Iraq.

COLLINGS: So I guess I'm just trying to get a handle on, just to try to recreate the scene, what the hopes of the group were. They were going out and showing these films, and what did they think would happen as a result of people seeing the films?

BELSITO: One of the things is in the working-class neighborhoods, because there was a draft on, I mean, during those years there were over two hundred kids a week getting killed, two hundred a week. In February of '68 during the Tet Offensive, forty-five hundred U.S. servicemen got killed in Vietnam; four thousand, five hundred. That's how big that war was. So one of the things we did—Jonathan did an

amazing thing. In Oceanside, which is sort of this terrible town outside of Camp Pendleton—

COLLINGS: Right. You see it on the news all the time now.

BELSITO: These anti-war people had a coffee shop in Pendleton, and they would give conscientious objector counseling to the Marines, and then we would go down there—Jonathan would, of course—and show films.

COLLINGS: Wonderful.

BELSITO: So we'd be in the belly of Camp Pendleton showing anti-war films from Vietnam and Cuba.

COLLINGS: How would people respond to those?

BELSITO: Oh, they loved them. They just went crazy for them. I mean, there was a lot of very serious resistance to the war within the army, and one of the reasons why eventually why they had to get out of it, and also the same thing is happening in this war, is that the army became so demoralized that it became a problem.

I remember there's a famous incident when President [Lyndon B.] Johnson came to see the troops off, and then the news story came out about how he'd gone before this unit. Before, all the soldiers had been searched and all their ammunition had been taken away. [Collings laughs.] I mean, that's how it was. The biggest cause of death among officers of Vietnam was being shot in the back, because they were getting killed by their own men, because the young officers are the ones who come in and say, "Oh, let's go charge."

COLLINGS: So you said that the FBI began to harass the group. What form did that take?

BELSITO: It was kind of an interesting incident. There was a manifestation in Berkeley called People's Park, and I think there was some riots or demonstrations, and a kid got killed; shot by the sheriff, something like that. So we ended—I don't have a copy of it; I wish I had a copy. Dennis [Hicks] and Stephanie [Waxman] might have it. We made a poster, and it was a crazy poster. It said "Defend Venice," and we showed this picture of these people fighting in People's Park. Basically the text was something like, "What's happening there is happening here, and we've got to get ready." I don't know if we actually said "take up arms" or something, and we might have not been that stupid.

But we did a poster. We had a poster party, and we ended up putting up like hundreds of these posters all over Venice and the Westside, and it brought the FBI down big-time on us. They were parked outside the office. They started coming by the house. Then we even had these other people who were doing some things in Venice, who we didn't like very much. This guy's name was John Hay [phonetic]; I just thought about it. He actually had his office and home broken into by the police, and the guy got beaten up.

COLLINGS: Wow.

BELSITO: And it was because of us. I mean, he didn't do anything. He was just the usual suspect in Venice, because he was always making trouble. I remember that poor John Hay got beaten up because we put up the posters. But then they figured out we did it. We made up the name of some nonexistent committee, the People's Committee to Defend Venice, or Free Venice Committee, something stupid like that, which didn't even exist. So we were very happy with that.

COLLINGS: But that was separate from any of the film activity.

BELSITO: Well, yeah, but what had happened is that had brought—And then the FBI began to notice us in our entire range of activities, and that comment about enemy propaganda had been made to our landlord.

COLLINGS: At the office on Washington Boulevard?

BELSITO: Yeah, 1431 [Washington Boulevard], which I don't have the photo here; I have it on the computer, but I don't have it here. But a few months ago, Jonathan and Christine Handen Vida and Elinor [Aurthur] and I went, and we took pictures out in front of that office.

COLLINGS: Oh, that's wonderful.

BELSITO: Yeah, we have those.

COLLINGS: That would be a great picture to go with the transcript, actually.

BELSITO: Or I can e-mail you that.

COLLINGS: Okay. I was sort of hoping there was a picture like that when I was coming over here.

BELSITO: No, it's not a problem. I'll just pull up your e-mail here. We can keep talking.

COLLINGS: So you went out on some of these screening sorties, shall we say. Just kind of going back to the other question that I had, okay, here you are, you've got a film, it's not a Hollywood narrative, there's no love story, etc. There's no acting; it's not a thriller, and you're showing it in somebody's workplace. Did people enjoy the films? How did they respond to them?

BELSITO: Well, it was mixed, but generally people loved it because there wasn't

anything then. It wasn't like they showed this stuff on the evening news.

COLLINGS: But you always had like a speaker or something to go with the films, right?

BELSITO: Yeah, and we even, I think, at some point had rigged a projector in the side of a truck. We might have had a generator or something, and could project onto a sheet hanging from a tree or from the side of a building, or we would project it onto the side of a building.

COLLINGS: At these events would the screenings be like the main event or would the screening be a part of a larger activity? I mean, would everybody be assembled specifically for the point of seeing these films, or would it be a part of a larger activity?

BELSITO: So I'll send you this one, and then you can tell me if you—Yeah, it's a nice one.

I'm sorry; why don't you repeat that.

COLLINGS: I was just going to say when you showed these films, were people assembled solely to see the films, or was it part of a sort of a larger organizing kind of activity?

BELSITO: It was probably pretty intimate, and it could be we would do it in conjunction with another, like a community organization. Then we could send a speaker along with the films. We could handle the technical aspects of it. Sometimes it would be a community-based group. It could be like in a church or that kind of thing, or before a youth group. We were interested particularly in hitting young men who might be of draft age, because we wanted to help counsel these guys to figure out

how they could resist, because what began to happen, as the war went on, is it's kind of like now, where you can see it sort of spilling out, where people suddenly realize, "Hey, wait a second. I don't really want to do this." But they had no means, like now, because there was no opposition.

COLLINGS: Whereas now there are even veterans; there are even sort of service families that are organizing against the war, that they can sort of reach out to.

BELSITO: That happened. As the war went along, that happened.

COLLINGS: Who were the leaders of the group, if you could say that the group had leaders?

BELSITO: Of Newsreel?

COLLINGS: Yes.

BELSITO: Well, certainly it was me and Jonathan, but I mean, you know, the people who worked hard— Oh, I remember; it's so funny, you remember— You talk about Ron Abramson and Barbara Rose, and Ron Abramson didn't last very long. He had a great line which he gave pretty early on. We were meeting actually over by Sunset Boulevard over at Echo Park, someone's apartment. Someone had a nasty apartment over there. I remember when Ron said— Because we were talking about— You know, we talked about violence and facing up to the fact that if we got involved in protest, you could get hurt; you could get killed. We talked a lot about revolution, because we were young and interested in that. And Ron, I love what he said. He said, "I don't mind dying for the revolution. I just don't want to be in the first wave."

[mutual laughter] Then he dropped out and we never saw him again.

COLLINGS: Right. You'd miss a lot of action that way.

BELSITO: But I think that the people who worked really hard and were part of it was myself and Jonathan. Dennis Hicks was very, very good. Stephanie, Elinor, Judy Belsito were always there. There was like a core. There was like a core.

COLLINGS: Was this like an office that was always open? Did it have like regular hours and that kind of thing?

BELSITO: Well, not hardly. See, but when we did that in '68, we weren't students anymore, because Jonathan had left; I had finished UCLA, and then Lola was on the way, so that was my draft deferment. Then I had a wife who was bothering me about actually—horrors, you know—bringing in money. So I had to figure out how to work and do that, and then Lola was born in May of '69.

COLLINGS: So you had sort of like a reading group?

BELSITO: Study group.

COLLINGS: Study group, yes. Was that kind of like a regular thing, or just kind of whenever, sort of ad hoc?

BELSITO: What it was, and it was a real turning point for us, and it was around the time, and the first group that we went to, I'm not sure if Dennis and Stephanie were in it, but Elinor and Judy and Jonathan and I certainly were; I think Dennis and Stephanie might have been. And it was a study group with a guy who did that one thing with us, and then we really didn't hear too much from him again, a guy by the name of Marv Treiger. Marv took us through a book by [Vladimir I.] Lenin called *What Is To Be Done?* And that, for us, it was somewhat of a life-transforming experience, because the book really spoke to us about what you had to do. The thing with Lenin's writings, see, we never sympathized with groups such as the Weathermen, because

what the Weathermen were, they were somewhat confrontational, somewhat violence-prone, and all of them were rich kids, which we weren't particularly. I mean, we weren't poor kids, but we weren't like wealthy, wealthy kids. And they wanted to collect guns and do things like that.

What Lenin talked about and what we thought was the proper way to do it was he always talked about education and about training the working class to think for itself, and we thought that was a better way, so that was our influence, and it kind of informed really everything we did in Newsreel and then thereafter when we finally kind of moved on a year or so later. We moved on from filmmaking and then went into labor organizing, basically.

COLLINGS: Just sort of going back to the screenings a little bit, was there any one particular film that was particularly useful to the group, in terms of stimulating discussion?

BELSITO: *Cu Chi* [*Guerilla Village*] was good. *Cu Chi* was good because it showed the opposition in Vietnam. You'd see that film, and you'd think, boy, you have to be crazy to go over and fight those people. Of course, it was a propaganda film. It was a propaganda film for the Vietnamese, but it was pretty impressive stuff.

I think that what had happened with the Panthers is I think *Off the Pig* was about the best film ever done about them, because they began to go through sort of a progressive development and then somewhat of a deterioration. Then they began to get killed, either by the police or by internicine stuff. This guy Ron Karenga, who invented Kwaanza, was in charge of a group, and his group assassinated a couple of Black Panther guys.

COLLINGS: Right, at UCLA.

BELSITO: At UCLA, yeah. Bunchy [Alprentice Carter] got killed there. And John Huggins. My wife knew him; knew Bunchy well, Sydney [Levine] did.

COLLINGS: This was sort of an important point for the group, too, wasn't it?

BELSITO: Well, it was important because, first of all, Ron Karenga got away with it. I mean, he never got touched. And then it was obvious to us that it was an assassination. What happened to the Panthers is that the best of them, Fred Hampton in Chicago, who was murdered in his bed during a police break-in. The guy was sleeping in bed. The police came in and shot him in his bed. The best ones—Fred Hampton—the best ones were murdered. So what you had left were the ones who were less good or compromised or drug-addicted or really criminal types or agents, and they were basically picked off one by one. So the Panther Movement was just decimated and so forth.

Then at that point the Movement had moved past it already, and the white radicals were looking to get more active on their own and not just to be support groups for the black revolutionaries. Then when you saw in some of the white radical groups, some of the ones we were in, was where you had the groups that were multinational.

COLLINGS: So at a certain point Jonathan and a few other people actually moved into a kind of a collective household with the Black Panthers?

BELSITO: No, no, there was no Black Panthers there. It was downtown L.A., south of the garment district. It was a house, and what they did is they had a technical facility there where they would be working on films. I mean, I think Dennis was there and Jonathan and Elinor. I mean, I sure as hell wasn't going to move in there, because

at the time I was the only one who had a kid, and so I wasn't taking my kid to live down there. I forget the street. But, yeah, that lasted for a little while. It was a way of having enough room to work on the films.

COLLINGS: And the film that was being made right then, going back, was *Repression*, right?

BELSITO: Yeah, that was Jonathan and Dennis' work, basically. I didn't work on that one too much. I might have helped them and shot some of it, because I was a DP then, but everybody could shoot and work with film.

COLLINGS: Let me turn this.

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COLLINGS: —work on any films when you were with the Newsreel collective?

BELSITO: Well, only in a collective sense. I personally didn't have any projects that I personally was pushing forward. I worked with it in the way we all would, but my concerns at that time were that by that point I had a child to support, so I was like looking for work, and Newsreel became something I did in my spare time. It was not a full-time thing, but I was active in it. And then what also happened around that time is, because of our study and our evolving political views, that we finally after a while came to the conclusion that for us and what we wanted to do politically was not to build a bigger and better Newsreel, but to move on and actually get in with the national organization that was doing organizing work among working-class people. Then a few years later we came around to it again—

COLLINGS: Oh, really.

BELSITO: —Jonathan and David and I, and actually had a house down in the same neighborhood, where we formed a company called— That was '78; it's not too much later, but almost ten years later. We formed a company that was dedicated to making social-issue documentaries. We made a film; worked on a number of different projects.

COLLINGS: Let's hear about that, because that's not in the—

BELSITO: Well, Emancipation Arts was founded by me, Jonathan and David Sandoval, who we met later. David had come out of the East Side. He'd been part of

the Brown Beret Movement and had worked, or he still works, at Cal State L.A.

David has a Chicano background. So we formed that, and our first project was a film about the Texas farm workers, which Jonathan had been involved with for a few years and which we had known about through our political connections. We started making a film, getting money; we raised quite a bit. I was the big money-raiser. It was actually one of the biggest grants ever given by the NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities]; it was a quarter of a million dollars—

COLLINGS: Good lord.

BELSITO: —we got for that film.

COLLINGS: That's unbelievable. You would never get that today. [laughs]

BELSITO: Yeah, no shit.

COLLINGS: That's amazing.

BELSITO: Actually, the film was—So there was a lot of permutations, that we were covering this strike of these Texas farm workers, etc., etc. We got Barbara Kopple involved, Barbara Kopple in Harlan County fame and so forth, and Hart Perry came on as DP. Hart ended up being the director of the film. He's supposed to call me because he's coming to L.A. He has heard about Jonathan passing.

So cut to last year, I mean '03, Hart finally finishes the film, and we got a distributor, Seven Arts Releasing, a friend of mine, Udy Epstein, is distributing it, and we got in two pretty good film festivals with it.

COLLINGS: Fantastic. What's the name of the film?

BELSITO: It's called *El Valle de Lágrimas* or, more likely, *Valley of Tears*.

COLLINGS: Wonderful.

BELSITO: It's about this strike in South Texas, and then what Hart did, he did the twenty-five-year-later update.

COLLINGS: Oh, fantastic.

BELSITO: Yeah, it's actually pretty cool, and it's a pretty good film. It almost got in Sundance [Film Festival]. Festival head [Geoffrey] Gilmore wanted it, but the other programmers didn't, so it didn't get into Sundance that year.

COLLINGS: That's really great. I'm looking forward to seeing that.

BELSITO: If you make a note, the distributor is Seven Arts, and if you go to any of the big video places, I'm sure— FACETS Video in Chicago, Facets.org, they have a website; you can order it from there. It's called *Valley of Tears*.

COLLINGS: That's great. So this is sort of the legacy of L.A. Newsreel, in a way.

BELSITO: It was. It was, and by that time we had lost touch pretty much with the rest of them. Dennis and Stephanie were still around; they were in Venice. Stephanie became a TV writer. Dennis, which I found out just last month when I went to Jonathan's service—I knew this, but I hadn't recalled—Dennis became a therapist, and he has a practice.

COLLINGS: Yes, I interviewed him in his office.

BELSITO: Yeah, I was supposed to go; I have to go get together with him this weekend. He suggested a walk on the beach. He wanted to talk about something, so I said I'd be happy to. I'll call him on Saturday.

COLLINGS: That sounds great. So what other films did you make with your company in the late seventies?

BELSITO: Well, with that company, I think the *Valley of Tears* might have been the

only one. We helped a lot and then I went on my own. Jonathan kind of got out of film, and I went on my own, and from that point on, we had this little period in the early, middle seventies when we were totally out of film, and I came back to it through that organization, and then I never left.

I have since founded a number of nonprofits. There's a very large, the most successful American independent filmmaking organization, called IFP, Independent Feature Project. You may or may not have heard of it. They have offices. Yeah, I was one of the original founders of that, and that was after Emancipation Arts in the early eighties. Then I came back here. I have always lived in L.A., but I worked in New York a lot. I came back here and I opened the L.A. office, and I ran that for a year.

COLLINGS: So are you the only Newsreel collective member that has stayed on in—

BELSITO: Film business?

COLLINGS: Yeah.

BELSITO: Yeah, unless Stephanie's still writing TV shows, I guess I am.

COLLINGS: I guess she is still writing.

BELSITO: It's funny, what I do now is I work extensively on the independent side of the film business. That's where our company is, and we independents have essentially taken over; I mean, there is really nothing else. I mean, the non-independent side, if you think of the Hollywood studios, they're really not a factor. They're pretty moribund, in fact, and they make a few lousy films a year, but nobody cares about them. So, yeah, that's kind of where it is.

What I do is I do a lot of work with young filmmakers nowadays. Like one of

these messages flashing on the screen; I have to call this woman who is a very dear friend, but she has a script I read last night about AIDS in Africa, and it's a really important film and I've got to try to figure out how to get this film made. Yeah, I'll just throw out an interesting statistic to you, because this is interesting, I think, to people like us. More people die in the developing world every month of AIDS than died in that tsunami.

COLLINGS: Wow. That's staggering.

BELSITO: Yes. I mean, it's unbelievable.

COLLINGS: It is.

BELSITO: So her film, she has a real affinity for Africa. If she had her druthers, she'd move from Culver City and go to Africa. So I'll try to help her with this script. When we break, I'll call her for a meeting.

COLLINGS: I'm glad that you've sort of sketched in all of this stuff, because it makes it sound like the really interesting and important efforts of the L.A. Newsreel were not just a flash in the pan. It was sort of like your schooling for going on and doing these other things.

BELSITO: I think what it is, is that the environment was such at that period, was that we—us—couldn't not do anything. We had to do something. We didn't know what to do. We didn't like the Communist Party, whatever that was. The basic kind of outlets in society were very, very limited, so it was like everything was sort of coming up new. That was the feeling of it, and there was lot of stupid stuff and a lot of amateurish stuff, but it was the best we could do. It was like the people who, in the summer of '64, went to Mississippi and got harassed and beaten and arrested,

whatever happened to them down there in that time. But it was a passage that a lot of us went through.

COLLINGS: When you look at the coverage of networks, cable news, what have you, of just the Iraq war, for example, you realize that it's sort of a similar situation. It's not quite as difficult as the Vietnam period, but it's sort of a similar situation, and you are sort of still in a situation where you want to get these alternative views out, because they're there, but they're not really there.

BELSITO: I think that we are in a similar situation, because I suspect that a lot of the opposition to the Americans in Iraq is coming from the Baathists; I have no doubt about it. But the troops, these guys in the field, or these kids—

COLLINGS: That doesn't matter to them, where the opposition is coming from.

BELSITO: Yeah, what they are in Iraq is they're patriots. They're just like the kids in Vietnam; they're patriots. What that means is that you have a foreign army there; they don't want them there, so they're going to go and fight. That's, I think, the real situation you have there. It's not this al-Qaeda nonsense or these foreign guys who they can never seem to find; it's not that. You know, because it seems to be a law of nature that you go and invade a country; the people of the country aren't going to want you there. They're going to come out in the street and fight you and make you go away.

Now all the U.S. is talking about is, let's see, what's really the best way we can get out. That was a discussion that went on, I think, in the inner circles in Vietnam, and they took a pretty long time to decide to do it, because they didn't finally get out until '75. Then, of course, as soon as they left, the entire thing collapsed.

COLLINGS: That's right, and now I'm wearing a jacket that's made in Vietnam.

BELSITO: Yeah, well, my daughter's been on the beaches there. She tells me it's very nice. [mutual laughter]

COLLINGS: Would you like to take a break, because you said you needed to—

BELSITO: No. How much longer do we have?

COLLINGS: Well, like forty-five minutes or something, if that's okay with you.

BELSITO: Well, we can work through. Let me just see what time it is.

COLLINGS: It's 3:53.

BELSITO: Tell you what. Let me call this one woman.

[tape recorder off.]

COLLINGS: One more sort of L.A. Newsreel question.

BELSITO: Sure.

COLLINGS: In David James' article—I'm sure you've seen this really detailed article on the L.A. Newsreel—he talks about how the murder of Bunchy Carter and John Huggins sort of made the group decide to align themselves with the concerns of the Black Panthers, and at that point started to work on the film *Repression*, and he says, quote, “By this point Los Angeles Newsreel had transformed itself from a loose umbrella for heterogeneous individuals into a disciplined, democratically centralized collective,” unquote. I'm just sort of interested in the way that— How do a bunch of college students working together run themselves? I mean, how did you organize yourselves?

BELSITO: Well, I think, to be honest—I love David—I think he's giving us more credit. The people in the organization who had authority were the people who did the

work.

COLLINGS: Gee, what a radical concept. [laughs]

BELSITO: That everybody liked particularly Jonathan and myself because we were the articulate ones, we were outspoken, and we would be the ones who would always sort of be taking kind of the leadership positions on things. As far as how it was organized, I mean, really the organization, we didn't have meetingitis where we'd have like real meetings and sit there all day and talk everything to death, but how we had meetings and how we planned things basically had to do with sort of project-oriented.

COLLINGS: Would you have regular meetings?

BELSITO: It's hard to recall now. We certainly did meet because we want to talk about this and that. We had that office for a little while; I forget how long we had it, maybe for a few months or something. It got to be more of a burden, because when you have an office, then you've got to sit around and you have overhead. That's the last thing we wanted. I think that we would organize around certain activities, and then the study groups became an activity. Now, there were some people who had more of an affinity for that than others. Guys like—I forget Michael's name; I'm sure he's in the article and everything.

COLLINGS: Does it begin with K?

BELSITO: His last name?

COLLINGS: Yeah. No, no, that's—

BELSITO: No. Let's see.

COLLINGS: Michael Murphy?

BELSITO: Yeah. I mean, Michael Murphy could have cared less about reading books. Michael was like an artist and a sort of a free spirit. Michael would attend all the meetings and he'd agree and everything, but he just wasn't like that, and, I mean, he was who he was. I think in the end that even though Dennis and Stephanie might have agreed with us, that they— When you start going down this political trail, there's certain conclusions that become very obvious, such as if really what we're doing is digging in for the long stretch to help prepare the working class to seize state power, why are we sitting around talking about movies and films? What we should be doing is really thinking about how to get organized.

COLLINGS: Have labor unions and that kind of thing?

BELSITO: Well, we eventually all got jobs. I went to work; I ended up working in an auto plant for eight years.

COLLINGS: Doing what?

BELSITO: Working on the assembly line.

COLLINGS: Oh, really.

BELSITO: Yeah.

COLLINGS: Well, this is a fascinating part of the story.

BELSITO: Well, but that's the logical things where it takes you, and we got involved with groups that promoted and approved activities like that; and also studying, because we wanted to study, and also working with other groups, people like ourselves, and then we ended up, after doing years of this, we ended up coming back to the film business with this strike in South Texas, this farm workers' strike, which involved a lot of political contacts that we had made in these previous years. So that film is really

a very interesting— The film is not out, I should say, because Hart Perry— We had really no input into the final version of the film, but a lot of us is in that film, particularly the early stuff, which is the best stuff in the film.

But there's certain logical conclusions you make which then influence your action. I mean, I thought about it at the time and I think about it now, that it took us inexorably—I mean, if we started studying those books, it inexorably would take us away from Newsreel and those kind of activities.

COLLINGS: What would you do when you worked at the auto plant in terms of spreading this kind of thinking among your fellow workers?

BELSITO: Well, I mean, you have different levels of working. I mean, on the one hand, I worked in the labor union, where I did a lot for that; I mean, we went out and organized different things. Then on the other hand, I mean, we would try to organize workers into cells, you could call them, or groups, and talk about political issues, or even study Marxist-Leninist books, which we did. I mean, all over the country.

Sometimes, some of these cities and places, I didn't have to— You have to teach these people to read; then you give them Lenin to read. It was kind of like that. But they did it, and it was a pretty big group. I mean, a lot of the affiliated groups, I mean, I can tell you now because it doesn't matter, but the people in Harlan County, that was us. I mean, the people in the Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement, that was us. The people in South Texas, that was us. I mean, we were all over the map. At one time in the early and middle seventies this was a very big deal.

COLLINGS: What was the name of the umbrella organization?

BELSITO: It went through names. At that time it might have been called Communist

Labor Party.

COLLINGS: When you talk about Newsreel, Jonathan's name pops up all the time. Do you think that the group would have been possible without him? It sounds like he was a sort of a driving force behind—

BELSITO: I think that Johnny, more than anything, worked very, very hard. He had the biggest presence like that, and that's why his name comes up. I mean, people respected Jonathan because he was there. Jonathan also personally was an extremely fearless person. There was never a situation, he didn't care what it was, that he would not walk into. I mean, they talked at his service about how he stood in front of a bulldozer in Playa Vista when they were tearing up the wetlands there. This guy in the bulldozer came right at him, and he said Jon just stood there and he didn't move; he didn't flinch; and the guy just couldn't believe it. I said, "No, that was Jonathan." I said, "That's definitely Jonathan." He had that kind of fortitude and resolve, and he was an exceedingly hard worker.

In light of what happened to us after that, kind of the core group of us, going in and becoming involved in labor organizing and in Marxist organizations, that I see it now as Newsreel being an organization that was somewhat of a rite of passage for us. Not that we didn't do things there or that we weren't important, because that, I'll tell you, distributing those films the way we did—

COLLINGS: Yeah, it was like sixty films a week sometimes. In the article, or maybe that was Stephanie Waxman who said that, that there were many, many screenings per week. Is that right?

BELSITO: Yeah, because we would all be going out with them. For a while there,

that was our principal activity. We had the films and we just wanted to get them out there. We were the source; there was no one else. I mean, for me really the funniest thing when I think back on it is that coffeehouse in Oceanside, showing it to Marines, and probably half the audience was military intelligence, but we went and we showed it to the Marines down in this coffeehouse.

COLLINGS: Were there any other particularly memorable screenings that you can think of?

BELSITO: Well, just all over L.A., going to the city parks in the summertime and showing it on a wall or hanging a sheet from a tree, doing things like that. There was a public library in Venice we used to go to and show it there. The librarian would help us show anti-war films.

COLLINGS: Later on, how did you meet David Sandoval?

BELSITO: Through our political work, but I ended up, after this period was over in 1970, I moved to East L.A. to a town called City Terrace, which is across the freeway from Cal State Los Angeles; of course, the [I-]10 Freeway. Jonathan for a while lived with us. That was the period that he moved to New York and Brooklyn, he and Elinor did when the kids were little, and then ended up moving to Chicago. Then he sort of found his sort of true calling as a writer and as a political polemicist, which was really, I think, what he really excelled at the best. I mean, he was a very creative guy. He was a painter. He wrote scripts, and I think his book on Charlie is a great testament to his artistry, but really I think his most exceptional talents intellectually were as a polemicist. Jonathan had what we call working-class jobs, but his main thing was writing and thinking. He edited a journal, a magazine, for a while.

COLLINGS: What was that called?

BELSITO: Oh, darn. I can't recall.

COLLINGS: I'll find that. Would you mind just sort of—I think that we've sort of gone over a lot of the things we talked about going over, but we haven't touched on anything about your life leading up to UCLA. Would you like to sort of sketch that in today, or would you like to set up another time?

BELSITO: No, I don't mind. No, I don't mind. I grew up in New York City. I came from an Italian family, where my maternal grandmother was a Jew, which makes me Jewish. I had two older sisters, and I had always been—My mother was a New York City schoolteacher, my dad was an attorney; and I grew up in a part of New York City where you had houses and green grass. I, at that time, got a real distaste for the weather on the East Coast of the U.S. at that time, because I had to shovel the walk, and then it was hot in the summer, and I just hated it. I would always be cold in the winter. When I was little, I always had to walk to school, and it was just always so damn cold. I hated it.

We traveled a bit. My parents were pretty well off, fairly well off; not wealthy, but, I mean, they bought me a car when I was in high school and stuff like that, so they were doing well. We traveled a bit, and both my older sisters left home as soon as they could. My one sister, middle sister, who at that time I was closest to, went to the University of Wisconsin, and I visited her there and I ended up going there as an undergraduate. That's where I started working on films. The University of Wisconsin was always a very—still is today, I'm sure—a very politically progressive and very conscious place.

COLLINGS: Yes, it is.

BELSITO: Quite a wonderful place, and I've always had very fond memories of it.

Then went from there to UCLA film school in 1965 and ended up living in Venice.

COLLINGS: Were you planning to make commercial Hollywood films at that time or what?

BELSITO: No.

COLLINGS: Before you came out to UCLA.

BELSITO: No. I had had a literary degree. I was a lit major, and the only thing I knew was that I really liked California. I thought the film business seemed like an interesting business. I knew nothing about it, and I came to it like a lot of people come to it, with a lot of hopes and dreams and "see what happens" kind of stuff. No, I did not want to work in Hollywood, that was for sure. I didn't ever quite know what I wanted to do. I mean, I suppose if you could have asked me at the time, I probably wanted to make films like Jean Luc Goddard, like French nouvelle vague films, which Goddard is still making. I liked international cinema. I became somewhat of a film nerd in high school, and I would be the only one in my entire school who would go into the city every weekend and watch Italian films, Japanese films, Swedish films, whatever was there.

COLLINGS: How did you sort of start finding out about those films?

BELSITO: I grew up in New York City. They were accessible. If I had grown up in Ohio, they probably wouldn't have been accessible.

COLLINGS: Were your parents socially conscious?

BELSITO: Nope. My dad was a New Deal Democrat. He was not a Communist, but

he was a progressive guy in his day, but a New Deal Democrat and, you know, was a working-class kid who came up in the mean streets of New York and made quite an amazing life for himself.

My mother had come from a bit of a different background. Her family was more petty bourgeois. Her father had a small business, and her mother had always pushed her towards education and stuff. But they were both pretty smart, pretty odd people, but very smart, and they liked to travel. They kind of gave me that bug. So I'd say I had some advantages, but there was nobody there in the movie business; nobody there was political. I got that stuff on my own.

COLLINGS: And perhaps from Wisconsin?

BELSITO: Yes, a lot of it. I made my first film in Wisconsin, which was actually my reel when I applied to UCLA film school, and they accepted me on the basis of it.

COLLINGS: What was that film about?

BELSITO: Funny you should ask. It was called *Greasy Meat*, and it was about a group of people who go in and have a meal in which they just are very gluttonous, kind of throw the food around and smear it all over, and it was sort of a farce. It was actually rather funny. It was ten minutes, which was probably about five minutes too long, but in any event, that was my film. I don't even know if I still have it.

COLLINGS: That's a very interesting topic.

BELSITO: Yeah, well, it is what it is. I then went on in later years to write films, and actually a few got made and—

COLLINGS: What were those?

BELSITO: —[inaudible] produce it. Well, I think the most notable one that I wrote

the original screenplay, co-wrote the original screenplay, was called *Class Action* with Gene Hackman and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio, probably about twenty years ago now. It was the first yuppie lawyer movie, the first yuppie, about a young woman lawyer who has a conflict with her father lawyer, lawyer father, an ethical conflict.

COLLINGS: Oh, right. Yes, I'm remembering.

BELSITO: Anyhow, that was our script. I did that; wrote that script with a friend of mine. Then I wrote some others and I made some films and things, but I like what I do now. Now I get to tell producers what to do, so I like that.

COLLINGS: And what are you doing right now?

BELSITO: Well, Film Finders is a seventeen-year-old company that is a data company and a consulting company, and what we do is we keep a database and we track information about films, companies, finances, people, on a database, of the entire international film business. It's very current data. It's good data, in the sense of being correct, because we do a lot with e-mails and phone numbers, and basically we sell this at a very high ticket to the international film business, as I say, companies all over the world, basically telling them what's going on, what's important.

For example, now it's Sundance, and we have—Who called us on Sundance? Oh, somebody called yesterday, and they wanted—Oh, no, our good friend Ann Thompson, who's a senior film writer; she's doing *Hollywood Reporter*, and she says, "What's going to happen at Sundance businesswise?"

So that's what we know, so Sydney called me and said, "Ann wants this, but she's not going to pay us, you know."

I said, "Oh, give her this." So we'll give her a little bit.

COLLINGS: Give her a taste.

BELSITO: Yeah, which is more than anybody else knows, because we know more than the reporters know, plus our information is accurate. So we said, “Okay, these are the films. This is who’s repping them. This is what’s going to go. These are the deals that have been done already.” So we give her enough to write a good article on for the *Hollywood Reporter*.

Then the other call I got when you were here, when we took the call; there were two other calls. I’ll tell you what they are, because they were interesting. Well, it’s nothing, and you see the e-mails popping one after the other, but that was Susan Glatzer, who buys for main Paramount, main studio Paramount, discussing, “Well, I’m going to go to Berlin for the first time. What should I do? Where should I go? What’s going to happen?” That was that conversation that you heard.

The other one was Amie, who wrote a really important script about AIDS in Africa, which politically, for me, is a very important topic now, and I’ve got to meet with her and her co-writer on Thursday night, which I made that meeting, in order to begin to tell them what are we going to do, and to see if— Because I’m going to Sundance, Rotterdam, Sweden, Berlin, in the next few weeks, which is one of the things I do is I travel a lot, and I’ll be talking to a lot of people in the world.

COLLINGS: But you’re not going to be showing the film on a sheet, right?

BELSITO: Well, the film exists in a script form now, but beginning to talk to people about raising money, about maybe becoming involved in the project, seeing what else is being done along those lines. I happen to know a number of interesting people in Africa who might be willing to get involved in such a project.

COLLINGS: Wow. Fantastic.

BELSITO: Yeah, and so you take the filmmaker from Culver City, who goes to Kenya and whose heart is really there—she really would like to live there—and talk to her and her partner about what to do.

COLLINGS: Very good. Okay.

[End of January 11, 2005 interview]

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

April 26, 2005

COLLINGS: This is Jane Collings interviewing Peter Belsito on April 26th, 2005, at his office in West Hollywood.

I've got an e-mail from you here. It says, "I remembered another very funny story not told to you about our first office on Bonnie Bray [Street] near downtown," so I was wondering what that story was.

BELSITO: Well, the genesis of Newsreel, just to step back, was in September of '68. I happened to see an article in what was then called the *L.A. Free Press*, has since kind of evolved into the *L.A. Weekly*, but it was about a screening of a Black Panther Party propaganda film called *Off the Pig*, and it was in the Echo Park District in a coffeehouse on Hoover, and it was being shown by a group called San Francisco Newsreel. I called up Jonathan and I said, "Let's go see it."

So he and I went there and we saw that, and we were then somewhat encouraged, and what Jonathan and I did was then we founded L.A. Newsreel, which the core of it at the beginning was a group of Westside student filmmakers or ex-student filmmakers who were of somewhat of a radical political persuasion, anti-war, etc.

Mostly at that time, at the end of the sixties, what happened, it was rather interesting, the Civil Rights Movement had decayed somewhat, and Martin Luther King had—It was the year he was assassinated, but by that time he had really lost a lot of his credibility because the mass of black people had moved away from nonviolence,

definitely towards violence, and the cities were going up in flames. In fact, the day Martin Luther King was killed—I remember it well—was in March of '68, which was an exceedingly bad year, that there was uprisings in like forty or fifty cities across the United States, and it was very hot in the States that day.

The Black Panther Party was an expression of— It wasn't a violent movement, but it described itself as being armed self-defense, which basically meant they carried guns around all the time. They were young blacks and we were their support committee, sort of white radical support committee, number one, for the Black Panther Party.

So we had a group of students, and then what we decided was that we needed an office. I forget how we came to it, but we were told that there was this office down on Bonnie Bray down by MacArthur Park. We went down and took a look at it and we liked it. It was an old Victorian house, which appealed to us because it had a bit of character, and in it, for a ridiculously low cost, there was like a room we could have.

There were a number of other organizations, and the only one I can remember that were in that building was a group of anti-war people. It was led by a guy called Morris Kight, and what they were is they were all gay guys who were radical against the war. At that time you didn't say "gays" or "queers" against the war, but they were like some kind of committee against the war, but everybody knew they were gay guys. They were in the building, too, and Morris Kight was a good guy. I think he's dead now, because he was kind of old even then, but he was really a good guy. So we felt comfortable there.

So I remember we went in, we had a meeting, and I remember the first thing

we did, the first thing we did is we drew up—and I think I did it—we drew up an entirely complete membership list with everybody's name, and there were probably about thirty, maybe forty people, with their addresses and their telephone numbers. That's all you had then; you didn't have e-mail addresses and mobiles. I had it printed up, and we put all the extra copies in the top desk drawer in the desk in the office on Bonnie Bray. We thought, "Wow, we're really off to a— Now we have a membership list, we have an office. We're doing great."

Well, what happened that night was, of course, the office was broken into and the entire membership list was stolen.

COLLINGS: Who do you think broke in?

BELSITO: Well, I would have no way of knowing. [laughs] But I would have a feeling that, thinking back on it now, I have a feeling that probably the entire building might have been rented and then leased out by the FBI to get dumb radicals to take their offices in there, because we certainly qualified as being dumb. Let's just say if it had been maybe a different time or a different circumstance, the ending might have been different. Instead of laughing about it, everybody on that list might have been disappeared, which did not happen.

The year after that, the government, in fact, started executing members of the Black Panther Party. Fred Hampton is one, and then the guys in Oakland, and always the best ones, because the Black Panther Party has always had a lot of questionable elements in it, and whether they were spies or criminal-type guys, but all the best guys got killed, and of course, the biggest tragedy was, I think, Fred Hampton in Chicago, because that guy could have gone anywhere. He was a wonderful guy. Then here in

L.A., of course, I should mention—I didn't know them; Sydney knew them—Bunchy Carter and John Huggins were assassinated around that time at UCLA.

COLLINGS: Right. We have a number of oral histories that deal with that event.

BELSITO: Well, I was at UCLA that day that those guys got killed, and it just totally devastated us. We didn't know them; they were killed in the building next door. But this was kind of normal; there was a lot of overlap. But it was so improbable that this should happen at UCLA.

COLLINGS: How did the word spread on the campus, as you recall?

BELSITO: Well, it happened in the building facing the gypsy wagon. The gypsy wagon was like a little catering hut where we got this really disgusting food, and then they had picnic tables set out and that, so we called it the gypsy wagon, and we all ate there. I go back there now, and there's like a whole eating complex.

COLLINGS: Oh, yeah, they have several. The food is still not any good.

BELSITO: In any event, so we were sitting around the gypsy wagon, and that's how people came running up. That's how you heard about everything, because that's where we hung out.

COLLINGS: Now, when you say that you were kind of a white radical publicity arm of the Black Panthers, was that something that was sort of formalized?

BELSITO: No, what it was is the Panthers had a very interesting philosophy. It was very enlightened. What they said is, basically they said, "Look, we don't hate white people. We're like you; we're just like you. We hate the powers-that-be, the imperialists, whatever." They were intellectuals, these guys, and they were up on all the leftist jargon, and they said, "Look, but down in the ghetto, you guys can't do

anything, because you've got the wrong color skin, so let us handle that, and if you want to help us out, here's what you can do." They kind of gave us a list, and then even at some point when they were fortifying their building before they got raided by the LAPD, they said, "You could bring us building supplies," sandbags and concrete blocks, which we did; which we found. Don't ask how we found them, but we got them.

COLLINGS: Who, you and Jonathan?

BELSITO: Newsreel people. Our Newsreel friends. I shouldn't mention any names, but you know who they are. So that's what we did. Then our thinking evolved; well, okay, so we like these guys and we certainly do like them, so what are we going to do, so that sort of thinking then led us to read Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* and begin to develop a broader political approach to the whole problems of the United States and what do people like us do. I mean, do we just have to help the black guys who are getting out and getting killed, or do we go out and do something ourselves? What it did is it elevated our political thinking, and eventually led us, Jonathan and myself, others, Judy and Elinor, out of Newsreel and into doing more let's call it community-based organizing, which was sort of our next evolution.

COLLINGS: When you left Newsreel, you said that you had to actually get a job, and you went into working in an auto plant.

BELSITO: Yeah, a factory job, yeah, down in Southgate. There used to be a GM [General Motors] plant there. Actually L.A. used to have four auto plants, two GM plants, a Chrysler plant, and a Ford plant. Now it has no auto plants.

COLLINGS: Yeah. Well, why did you go into that rather than do something that was

more suited to your college background or something?

BELSITO: What I had been aiming for, for my education, I had been a lit major and a history major, I didn't want to go into teaching, and then I discovered film, and I was actually pretty good at film, and I was a writer. I think that the times were such that they called upon us to do certain things. They were not normal times, you know. And we didn't have any false hopes; for example, that the United States was about to suffer a proletarian revolution or anything. I mean, nobody thought that, but we thought that there were a lot of poor, angry, disorganized people in this country, many, many millions of them, and we wanted to see what we could do, because the one thing about the sixties that it was, it was sort of an era in which there were a lot of impossible things that were realized. I think in the end we did end the war, and I think us and the guys in the U.S. Army who were refusing to fight and that kind of stuff. But I think that the times called upon us to do certain things, and I don't regret a bit of it. So I ended up being in the factory for eight years, and then when I came out, I started making films again.

COLLINGS: Do you think you made a contribution when you were working in the factory?

BELSITO: Oh yeah, we did some interesting things. We did some very interesting things, organizing things, educating people, having an effect. And I worked in the union, too, a lot; I worked in the UAW [United Auto Workers] with a lot of very, very progressive people in the UAW, who weren't necessarily of my political persuasion, but who were good people, and we did some interesting things together. Our union was very early, heavy supporters, for example, of the Farm Workers. We sent big

delegations of workers, which I helped organize, out to the Coachella Valley when they were striking.

COLLINGS: Sounds great.

BELSITO: Yeah, and then we got attacked by the Teamsters, who came with guns and were shooting at us.

COLLINGS: Why was that?

BELSITO: The Teamsters?

COLLINGS: Yes.

BELSITO: Because they were being paid by the employers. Teamsters at that time was not the Teamsters now; they were rather corrupt. They were like a gang.

COLLINGS: When you were at UCLA and you heard about the screening of *Off the Pig*, was it kind of unusual for some kids from UCLA to go off to a screening in Echo Park? I mean, I sort of can't imagine that right now. Maybe the city was less polarized than it is today.

BELSITO: Well, first of all, my sister lived in Silver Lake, so I was always used to going over there; so that wasn't a problem. But no, because a lot of the political stuff came out of that side of town, so that side of town was open to us. One of the big things that happened—and gee, I don't know the year, maybe '68—were the school walkouts in East L.A., which was sort of the cauldron for developing an entire generation of Latino political leaders were those school walkouts in the sixties. So that was, aside from the Watts Riot, which—I can tell you—in '64, the first Watts Riot, that was a very big deal, a very, very big deal.

COLLINGS: So you were already at UCLA at that time?

BELSITO: I don't know the exact—I think the walkouts might have been before my time at UCLA, but I just know the kind of legacy that they left, since I lived on the East Side for ten years after 1970, and then still to this day have many, many Chicano friends, Latino friends.

COLLINGS: Also when you were at UCLA, did you know anybody who was in what they called at that time the High Potential Program for ex-convicts that was bringing African American kids, Latino kids, to UCLA who might not have gotten in otherwise? It was sort of an early diversity program. [e.g. Bunchy Alprentice Carter and John Huggins].

BELSITO: No, because at UCLA we were in the film school, and we could have cared less about UCLA.

COLLINGS: Right. I think the film school is still like that. [laughs]

BELSITO: Yeah, all we wanted to do is make films.

COLLINGS: Like you're in a different world.

BELSITO: Well, we didn't care about UCLA.

COLLINGS: Yes, I know. That's the way it is. So that's the story that you wanted to tell me?

BELSITO: Yeah.

COLLINGS: I think that's a great story, because it really captures an era, doesn't it?

BELSITO: Well, I think it explains a bit about the age, the time.

COLLINGS: It does, because you've got a bunch of sort of liberal, sort of "We're going to change the world. The first thing we need to do is rent an office."

BELSITO: Yeah, and get a membership list.

COLLINGS: You may very well be right, that this is like the FBI sitting there like a cat getting their information fed to them.

BELSITO: I know that building closed down soon after that. That building didn't last, and now it doesn't exist anymore.

COLLINGS: Who else was in the building?

BELSITO: Well, I told you, the only one I remember was Morris Kight's group, whatever they were called. You know, something like the United Front for Democracy, or some name like that. Then a few years later in the seventies when the gay liberation thing came in, they then declared themselves to be— Morris was then leading a gay liberation organization of some name. Kight, K-i-g-h-t. But he was an interesting guy, and I admired him a lot. It was interesting, he was like a real flaming sissy kind of guy, which was sort of cool, because he never pretended. I liked Morris; he was a nice man.

COLLINGS: That sounds like a whole fascinating oral history on its own.

BELSITO: Yes.

COLLINGS: I just wanted to ask you, kind of wrapping up, what advice would you give activists of today, I mean, based on your experience from that time? Because things are different now, but many of the problems remain the same. I mean, if you were young today, how would you approach your activism?

BELSITO: Well, I kind of gave this spiel at a panel I was on on Saturday, but I'll tell you what I think. I know how I felt when I first—My parents were not radicals. My father was a New Deal Democrat. He was a good man, but he was a New Deal Democrat. They weren't Communists. My mother was a New York City

schoolteacher. When I first began thinking about the world and thinking about injustice, injustice and this and that, I felt alone. I felt like I was the only one, and I think that this is normal. I think everybody feels like that. I think that what anybody who wants to change the world has to understand is that they are not alone, is that there are many, many people who feel the way they do, and that one of the things you have to do—I think it's part of life—is you have to find people who have a similar vision to you, because then together you can do more than one person can do alone. So I think that whatever it is, and film is that kind of business where you do need to go out and find collaborators all the time, every day, so it can become sort of normal for that, but I think that that's the process, is not being alone and not being isolated, and find the people who think the way you do who can give you support in whatever you need, either in an organization or give you money or read your script or whatever it is and whatever you need, you have to be somewhat aggressive and find that.

COLLINGS: I think that's exactly what you guys are doing with your screenings, because you are both reaching out to people who already share these thoughts and just letting them know they're not alone, and then you're also bringing new people into the circle by raising their consciousness. So that's kind of exactly what showing the films was.

BELSITO: Yes, I think I would agree.

COLLINGS: Thank you, Peter.

BELSITO: Okay.

[tape recorder off]

COLLINGS: Okay.

BELSITO: Well, Ron Abramson was there at the beginning with us, and I think he was out of the film school, and then his girlfriend's name was Rose— It's in the article. Audrey Rose or—

COLLINGS: I don't have the names at my fingertips. There's a list right here.

BELSITO: Barbara Rose. Barbara Rose, who was a nice girl. We were then meeting at a house in Echo Park off of Sunset [Boulevard], which is kind of across the street— Somebody had a big apartment there in an older building across the street from a Cuban nightclub, now which I think is called Los Globos [phonetic] or something; it's on Sunset in Echo Park.

So we were talking about, as we always did in L.A. Newsreel, about philosophy and politics, and Ron said this wonderful thing, which I loved. I think at that point we had started studying Marxism; we were trying to figure out what our place was and what to do. Ron said, "You know, I understand that a time might come when it's necessary to die for the revolution, but I just don't want to be in the first wave." And then I think that was the last meeting he ever attended. [mutual laughter]

COLLINGS: He just sort of very politely bowed out at that point.

BELSITO: Yeah. Probably what he was really saying is he didn't feel comfortable with where we were going, wherever that was.

COLLINGS: Did that have to do with the involvement with the Black Panthers?

BELSITO: I think it more had to do with our Marxism and where we were starting thinking about society, revolution, the working class, you know, bigger movements, bigger issues. We weren't thinking about, "Okay, let's go down and shoot some footage of this demonstration." We were talking, "Wait a second here. Now, what

does the working class think about this?” I mean, that kind of stuff.

COLLINGS: Right, right. Because I think, sort of at a certain point, Stephanie Waxman, she also was one who felt like she didn’t want to get into anything too heavy and bowed out as well.

BELSITO: I don’t have a specific recollection of it, and Stephanie, I’m still friends with her. She’s a good woman. For whatever reasons, people come and go, but I thought Ron was kind of articulate in the way he summed that up.

COLLINGS: So what exactly led to the final ending of the group, in your opinion?

BELSITO: Well, I think that what we finally passed through identifying ourselves as radical filmmakers and propagandists and more wanted to deal with the questions of class struggle and the larger issues of society and what was our role, and that we realized that what we were sort of becoming were, as Lenin described them, professional revolutionaries; that we would do, get jobs, go live where we should for the betterment of the larger struggle. That’s a very different calling than having a camera and going down at five in the morning to the docks to shoot a demonstration, a rally, or a strike.

COLLINGS: So why did you think that the mission of documenting something that’s not being presented on the news was no longer worthwhile?

BELSITO: At least we felt—I can speak for myself and Jonathan—that the bigger issue of organizing the whole of society was a more important question than making isolated propaganda pieces.

COLLINGS: But doesn’t media play a role in organizing?

BELSITO: It was very different then. You have to understand. You have to

understand the time. There was no TV to speak of. It was Walter Cronkite. There was no Internet.

COLLINGS: So you felt like you couldn't— There was no exhibition.

BELSITO: Well, there wasn't. We were; we were the— Newsreel's great gift was that it was the first national distribution network for oppositional literature and film.

COLLINGS: Absolutely.

BELSITO: I mean, that's what we were. That was our gift. It wasn't because our films were so great; they were pretty bloody awful, you know. But the Cuban films, the Vietnamese films, the Russian films against the war, the Chinese films, the Palestinian films, those were something, and we distributed those. Nobody else did. We distributed them all over the country.

COLLINGS: Do you think that if you had had—this is hypothetical—if you had had more films to distribute that dealt with American issues, that that would have felt different?

BELSITO: No, because I think at that point there was, in our minds, just a taint—well, maybe it was our background—on the whole filmmaker question, and we wanted to move on to what we felt was a more serious and meaningful level of struggle.

COLLINGS: You felt like you were being like elitist, perhaps.

BELSITO: No, but not effective, you know, whatever. Being petty bourgeois dilettantes, whatever. Instead of playing at or recording or being sort of a witness to this, what we would actually do is become participants and be able to have a real effect on it, and that what we wanted to do was devote some time to figuring out how to be most effective, because coming as filmmakers, we came at it from a very low

intellectual level. We had camera; we had film; we'd go shoot. But we would be chasing events, and I think we wanted to think about, "Well, let's think about this. Maybe we need to influence events. Maybe we can do something more effective than what we're doing." So we thought we were going on to a higher calling.

COLLINGS: I think what you did was really admirable, no question.

BELSITO: Well, it felt okay at the time, and the times called us to do something. For me the unbearable thing, considering what the government was doing in Asia at that time, the unbearable thing was just doing nothing. It made me crazy. It literally made me crazy what our government was doing, and I just couldn't live with myself if I did nothing.

COLLINGS: When did you leave the auto factory?

BELSITO: I was there from August of 1970 until about mid-year 1978.

COLLINGS: So do you think that after the war ended, you felt more comfortable to pursue something else that—

BELSITO: That's another story, because what I did is I went back to film. I felt I was a lot smarter.

COLLINGS: Do you want to talk about that story?

BELSITO: Not now. I think that's a big topic for another time.

COLLINGS: Okay.

[End of interview]

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